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Research Paper

# Gender Variance in Twelfth Night

The island nation of Britain has had a long and complicated history with the concept of gender, its expression, and the performative roles held by its citizens. The Renaissance is no exception, showing that people were doing more than questioning the validity of the Catholic Church, but questioning cisgender roles, and exploring their own unique identities. One work from the Renaissance that openly subverts the concept of the male gender is that of William Shakespeare, in his play, “Twelfth Night.”

But, before we take the time to unpack this renowned work of theatre, it would be best to examine some definitions and the history of Britain’s relationship with gender non-conforming people. The definitions we will be exploring will include sex, gender, cisgender, transgender, and gender expression. I’ll begin by discussing the difference between the terms sex and gender. Definitions for these terms have evolved over time and it should be noted that while modern Western culture has a history of using these terms, interchangeably, more recent discussions of the two words separate these terms. Sex is defined as “the sum of the structural, functional, and sometimes behavioral characteristics of organisms that distinguish males and females” (Merriam-Webster). Merriam-Webster defines gender as “the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex.” (Merriam-Webster, Gender) In more recent years, the terms gender and gender expression have become interchangeable. Gender Expression specifies the behavioral and physical manifestations of one’s gender identity. This

indicates a person's internal sense of being female, male, a combination of the two, or an absence of both entirely.

So, what makes a person cisgender or transgender? To be cisgender is "of, relating to, or being a person, whose gender identity corresponds with the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth." (Cisgender) Transgender is defined as a person who identifies as a gender separate from their biological sex. According to a 2018 pamphlet from the United Kingdom Government Equalities Office, forty-one percent of transgender people had experienced a hate crime connected to their gender identity. Twenty-five percent had experienced homelessness (often due to discrimination), and sixty-seven percent had expressed fear of negative responses by sharing their identities with others (Government Equalities Office). Has this always been the case, and what did Renaissance England feel about this topic?

Gender roles frequently changed during the first millennium CE. Varying ruling groups from the Anglo-Saxons to the Celts, to the Romans. It can be said that all known history of transgenderism in Britain begins with the Roman conquest of Britain. Known as Britannia, the island's original occupants never possessed an extensive written record. Definitions and ideals conformed to that of the Roman patriarchy. Women's roles were demoted from warriors and rulers and removed their marriage rights. Rather than a marriage indicating a partnership between a biological man and woman, the woman was now the property of her husband as in Rome. But, as in Rome, transgender individuals had some level of rights and respect. The grave of a fourth century AD "gallus" was found. A "gallus" is an individual who was born male, yet became a priestess of Cybele through self-castration, cross-dressing, and taking on the social status of a Roman woman (Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Identities).

The Early Medieval era shows strictly defined gender roles, yet there were still those that exhibited non-conformance. Terms like hermaphrodite and androgyny (although, less often) came to refer to those that were non-binary, transgender, or any form of gender, romantic, or sexual minority. Hermaphroditism being “the condition of having both male and female reproductive organs.” (Hermaphroditism) The term comes from the Greek myth of Hermaphroditus, a being who was partly male, partly female. (Hermaphroditus) Androgyny is used interchangeably with the term hermaphrodite, yet has two definitions. One is biological and one psychological. In biology, androgyny defines individuals “with fully developed sexual organs of both sexes,” while its psychological definition “refers to individuals with strong personality traits associated with both sexes, combining toughness and gentleness, assertiveness and nurturing behaviour, as called for by the situation. Androgynous individuals are more likely to engage in cross-sexual behaviour than those who maintain traditional sex roles.” (Androgyny) During Shakespeare’s time, when “Twelfth Night” was written, genderfluidity was reflected in theater. Genderfluidity being “to change over time in a person’s gender expression or gender identity, or both. That change might be in expression, but not identity, or in identity, but not expression. Or both expression and identity might change together.” (Sabra L. Katz-Wise)

Twelfth Night is where we find an exploration of Renaissance gender and identity through the character of Viola, otherwise known as Cesario. Penned during the Elizabethan Era of the Renaissance, Twelfth Night is a romantic comedy about the exploits of the Duke Orsino, Lady Olivia, Viola, her twin, as well as the surrounding staff. Viola and her twin Sebastian find themselves shipwrecked in a land known as Illyria, believing the other to be dead. Olivia convinces the ship’s captain to assist her in falsifying her identity to gain employment in the home of the nearby Duke Orsino. “I prithee, and I'll pay thee bounteously / Conceal me what I

am, and be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent. I'll serve this duke: / Thou shall present me as an eunuch to him: / It may be worth thy pains; for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music / That will allow me very worth his service." (Shakespeare) In this moment, Viola refers to her gender performance as that of a eunuch, "a man or boy deprived of the testes or external genitals." (Eunuch) This could be done for a number of reasons. In his article *The Fertile Eunuch: Twelfth Night, Early Modern Intercourse, and the Fruits of Castration,* Keir Elam notes that this denotation does not suggest a change in gender roles, but in a removal of gender entirely. The musical aspect of Viola's disguise denotes her to be an *evirato,* a category of soprano singer that was popular in the in turn-of-the-century Europe. This is opposed to the role of an eastern slave, commonly employed as guards or servants within female harems.

Interestingly, Viola in her guise, is never again referred to as a eunuch, nor her talent for singing. In fact, she never sings within the play at all, instead posing as a page. With no explanation given, it is suggested that Viola's comment about disguising herself as a eunuch poses questions about reference or meaning, neither of which are provided with much resolution. This plan is never again mentioned and could either be a literal or figurative statement. Both indicate a loss. If literal, then the play is "castrated" in and of itself, because the play lacks any musical performance by Viola herself, nor is there any further mention of her assumed eunuch-hood. It has been proposed that her mimicry of a eunuch is simply the result of simple absentmindedness, or even a Shakespearean change of plot, but others advise against jumping to such conclusions. If read figuratively, "then we hypothesize not a missing plot but rather a notionally missing or castrated part, a part that Viola does not literally possess to begin with." (Elam) Elam suggests that if following the first interpretation of Viola's statement, it is evident

that she intends to hide, not only her innate sexuality but also the assumed masculinity of her guise, creating a double barrier of chastity against any potential sexual dangers of Orsino's court.

While this might be true, I would suggest that there is more here to be said about Viola's role as Cesario. Within her role, she finds herself taking on a more masculine embodiment, despite the previous suggestion that she is a eunuch. When we first see "Cesario" in his interactions with the Duke Orsino, he is sent to Lady Olivia's home as a messenger of the Duke's affections. Not only does Viola embody the assumed assertiveness of a masculine page, but as Cesario, Viola exudes the energetic persona denoted to young boys. He is referred to as a "lad" by Orsino, yet his masculinity is still questioned. "That say thou art a man; Diana's lip / Is not more smooth and rubious: thy small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound / And all is semblative a woman's part." Through this interaction, it is suggested that Viola/Cesario takes on a sense of androgyny. Even Malvolio, in the following scene comments on this state, but neither attribute this to a difference in gender, but in "Cesario's" liminal adolescent state. As Malvolio puts it, quite succinctly, "Not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy." (Shakespeare)

Therefore, Viola actively and thoroughly fulfills the role of a male. Even when being called into question, Cesario is never stated to be anything but a boy. This continues throughout the play, resulting in the misplaced affections of Lady Olivia, as when gifting her Duke Orsino's message, Viola as Cesario attracts Olivia. Under the assumption of manhood, Viola shows a sense of mobility and forwardness expected of a man in this time, going so far as to shout out a declaration of affection for Olivia on behalf of Orsino. This is so effective that Olivia is so readily moved. It is not until the end of the play that Cesario's identity is even called into question, and only due to the appearance of her brother Sebastian and the obvious

misunderstandings between characters. Being twins, it is as if there are two Cesario's. As Jacob M. Held states in his essay *A Golem Is Not Born, but Rather Becomes, a Woman: Gender on the Disc,* "Drag shows that all gender is performance, and in fact, a performance or imitation without an original." (Held) He points out that at the end of *Monstrous Regiment,* the rupert in drag performs femininity far more effectively than the women because, unlike the women, the rupert is aware that his role fulfills a performance. By doing so, he can fulfill the expectations of a woman by understanding the expectations from an outside perspective. This also suggests that while the women are capable of fulfilling the roles on their own, the expectations for their performance are based upon preconceived ideas built within a patriarchal society. The women are not fulfilling a role given to them by other women, but by the men within that society, and perpetuated by the men. As Held later states, "The more you conform, the more you obey, the less you are able to develop those skills and resources necessary to affirm your own agency." (Held)

In taking on the role of Cesario, Viola is provided with the skills and resources needed to affirm her own agency. In doing so, she not only fulfills the role of a masculine individual in her community but finds a revelation of agency in her own being. As Terry Pratchett points out in his book *The Wyrd Sisters*, "Things that try to look like things often do look more like things than things." (Pratchett) Meaning, our perceptions of a "proper thing" or a "proper man," are based upon our perception of what that thing or being expected to be. Cesario proves this completely, easily moving between households without any real questioning of his assumed identity. Even his seeming androgyny is ignored based upon his assumed youth.

What this suggests about Shakespeare's perception of gender is that of a performance, as opposed to an inherit quality. Considering the fact that young boys often played girls and women

on the stage during Elizabethan England, it's not hard to imagine the playwright coming to this conclusion. It would be difficult to imagine any actor being capable of performing a convincing female role without being capable of fully embodying the perceived conception of a woman.

While far from the understanding of gender and sex that we possess in the modern age, *Twelfth Night* fully suggests that even in the Renaissance, there were those that understood the concept of gender as a performed role. Inherit qualities be damned. Which begs the question, "Who else may have considered this possibility and understood its significance?"

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